

Favourite birds – Barred Warbler

Birding in autumn is marked by that sense of sweet anticipation that 'something good might turn up'. Being realistic, those mega-rarities from distant lands can only ever be a real bonus. Much more likely are those birds which, while not very rare, are scarce enough to be 'good birds' on any days birding. On the East Coast that might include a Bluethroat, Icterine Warbler or Wryneck. In a slightly higher league, perhaps a neat Red-breasted Flycatcher or a Barred Warbler.

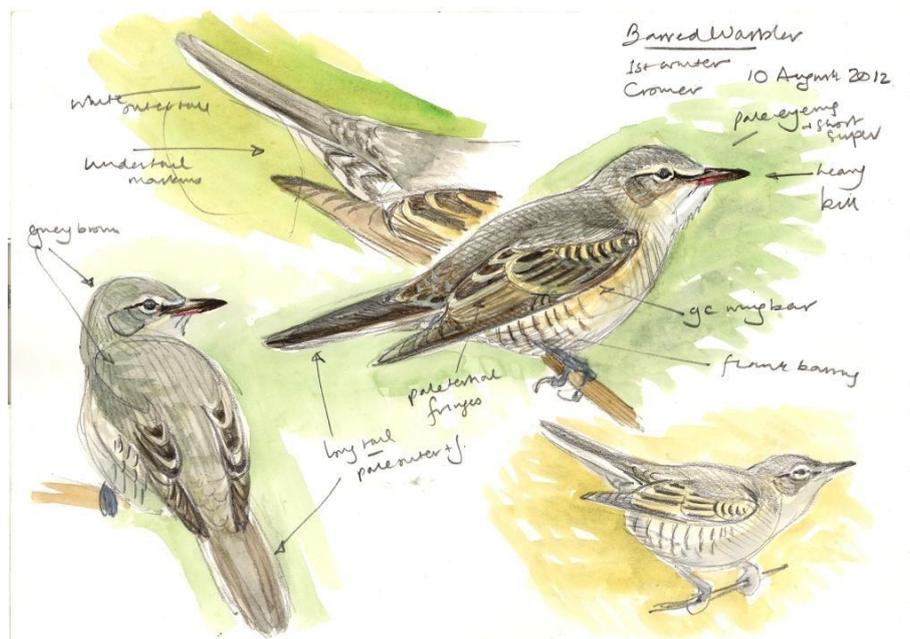
Barred warblers are among a long list of my favourite birds, not because I have seen lots of them, but because they challenge my birding skills.



Barred Warbler, Oare, September 2005 by Andy Vidler

I think of them as enigmatic. Imagine a large bulky warbler with an unruly tail and a floppy flight a bit reminiscent of a cuckoo. It has a rather variable grey-brown plumage with, on first winter birds, varying degrees of barring and pale fringes. It is clearly a *Sylvia* warbler with a big dagger of a beak and a tendency to be stained purple due to its fondness for blackberries or elderberries. Indeed, in autumn, to find a Barred warbler, first locate fruiting bushes in sheltered places!

They are notorious skulkers, often lurking deep in thickets of dense cover and being hard to observe. But this is not always the case. During one wet and windy autumn on the Calf of Man a bird came to a sheltered Elder outside the ringing room window every morning for a week, while the squally conditions kept all other human visitors away. An object lesson in the value of stealth, quiet and patience in field craft.



Barred Warbler notes, Norfolk 2012 by Norman McCanch

In spite of fifty years of birding I have yet to see an adult in breeding plumage, as all my visits to Eastern Europe have been too late in the season to catch up with them. They seem to leave their breeding range quite early. On the east coast of Britain it is a bird to be looked for from mid-August onwards.



Barred Warbler, Sandwich Bay October 1988 by Norman McCanch

Sadly they are not that common in Kent, averaging one or two a year; most of my encounters have been in East Anglia and, paradoxically, in the Irish Sea where I have met them on Lundy and on the Calf of Man. Indeed, on one occasion on the Calf I caught two birds in one net round!

In recent years they seem to have become less frequent, which is a shame as they are definitely a bird worth seeing.

Norman McCanch